

What is Bioterrorism and Who is Working to Protect Utahns?

IN THE MINDS of many Americans, the word bioterrorism brings thoughts of fear, anxiety and the unknown. However, the Utah Department of Health (UDOH), through a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is working to replace fear with facts and to prepare for bioterrorism should it happen in Utah. This article highlights some of the ways that public health will help protect Utahns in the event of a bioterror attack.

Bioterrorism occurs when diseases are intentionally released to make people sick. Anthrax, botulism, plague, smallpox, tularemia and viral hemorrhagic fevers are all diseases that could be used for bioterrorism.

Signs of bioterrorism may include an unusually high increase in people visiting their doctor or more people than usual purchasing over-the-counter medicine. When bioterrorism is suspected, disease experts, called epidemiologists, investigate the illness and work to keep it from spreading. They may interview sick people to find out their travel history and to identify with whom they have been in contact.

The UDOH has set up two new computer systems that help epidemiologists track disease outbreaks. Utah also has epidemiologists working in different parts of the state, to locate and respond to outbreaks wherever they may happen.

The UDOH Public Health Laboratory can quickly find out what is making people sick by testing samples from those who are ill. Since many tests can be performed at the Lab, the UDOH can get results quickly. This information helps determine what medicine people need and what can be done to keep the illness from spreading.

If many people are exposed to an illness or get sick, the UDOH can get large amounts of medicine from a reserve called the Strategic National Stockpile. This medicine will begin to arrive within 12 hours after a UDOH request. Public health officials



will tell the public who should take the medicine and where to get it.

Utahns will need to know what else to do to keep from getting sick. In an actual emergency, Utahns should pay close attention to the news for more information. The UDOH can also open a hotline to answer the public's questions with the most current information available.

An emergency communication tool called the Utah Notification and Information System (UNIS) can also help get the word out in an emergency. UNIS can send emergency alerts to notify healthcare professionals of important life-saving information by email, telephone and fax.

Hospitals, law enforcement, 12 local health departments and many other partners all need to work together to respond to an emergency. The UDOH works with hospitals and healthcare staff to train and plan for emergencies and to help provide the best care possible to an increase in patients. The UDOH has also obtained special equipment that can help keep contagious patients from spreading their germs to others.

However, the UDOH and its partners aren't the only people that need to prepare for a public health emergency. There are things that the public should do to prepare as well. Learn the signs and symptoms of the diseases that can be used for bioterrorism. Find out more about what your local community will do in an emergency. Utahns can take a first aid course or volunteer to help during emergencies in their communities. Finally, families should also have a family emergency plan and prepare emergency kits.

All of these efforts allow the UDOH to prepare not only for bioterrorism, but also for other public health emergencies, such as new diseases or serious flu seasons. The end result is a public health system that is able to take an "all hazards approach" as it prepares to protect the health of Utahns. **UTH**